

British National Volunteerism During World War II:

Image, Morale, and Service

Gabriel Méndez

HIST 4990

May 3, 2018

In the early days of Britain's involvement in World War II, the threat of invasion and domestic battle loomed heavily on the minds of the British people. In a matter of a few short years the British had watched from across the Channel as the German military took control of the continent, and all that seemed left to conquer or destroy was Britain. After the British forces were driven from the continent at Dunkirk, the fear of war at home increased even more, and as a result the civilians of Britain had to take destiny into their own hands. By the millions, men of all ages and social classes began enrolling in volunteer organizations to aid the war effort at home. As more men enlisted in formal military branches and became unable to help with the domestic war effort, younger and older men, as well as women, stepped up to ensure the well-being and safekeeping of the towns and villages across Britain. Volunteering to keep the homes and families of those serving safe from harm gave soldiers something to fight for, but more importantly it kept morale high among the British people at home and projected an image of strength and unity to combatants. Organizations such as the Home Guard, Women's Voluntary Service, Auxiliary Fire Service, engaged millions of volunteers in work that kept Britain functioning through the early days of the invasion scare, through the Blitz, and even beyond the war. The focus of this paper will be the ways in which these civil volunteer services contributed to the morale and image of the British domestically and how they handled the pressures of war.

The idea of home front volunteerism struck a chord with the British people in the early days of Britain's involvement in WWII. I define home front volunteerism in Britain at the dawn of the war as the overwhelming sense of urgency and desire to contribute to the safety and maintenance of communities on a voluntary basis. The way that home front volunteerism

intersected domestic morale and image worked differently than the stereotypical idea of charities typically run by upper class women at the time. Volunteering during war took on a whole new meaning. Rather than idly filling the hours of the day of like wealthy volunteer women of the past, people from all walks of life enrolled en masse to help their country and their people. Even more important than the simple fact of volunteering was the image and sense of duty to remain calm and collected for the people in their communities. Without the composure of those in leadership positions in the community, there is no telling to what degree the national mood may have been different and affected the outcome of the war.

These same factors can be observed and written about when discussing Germany's home front operations. Like Britain, Germany had an issue with morale and the general "mood" of the people and tried to play up the positive aspects of war like the victories across Europe.¹

However, unlike the British who turned to average citizen volunteers to elevate the morale of the people, the Third Reich pumped out propaganda that did little to assuage the feelings of complacency or dread that afflicted German citizens.² Another failure on behalf of the German government was their treatment of women and how, unlike female British citizens and volunteers, they were stripped of their status and forced into far more limited roles than they occupied pre-war. The government prided itself on removing the country's women from harm, but this crippled their collective ability to defend the home front and serve local communities.³

Germany did outpace Britain in the sheer numbers of volunteers among men including the number of Fire Wardens, the equivalent to Britain's Auxiliary Fire Service, due to the Air

¹ Wilhelm Wolfgang Schütz, and Barbara de Sevin. *German Home Front* (London: V. Gollancz Ltd., 1943) 86.

² Earl R. Beck. *Under the Bombs: The German Home Front, 1942-1945* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1986.) 36, 115.

³ Schütz and Sevin, *German Home Front*, 117-118.

Defense Law of 1935 that accumulated more volunteers as the bombing campaigns intensified.⁴ There are many great resources going into more detail about German home front operations, but those efforts will not be discussed in this paper, and the sources used for this paragraph will be included in the footnotes as well as for further reading.

In this paper, I focus on the actions of those who participated in the Home Guard, WVS, and AFS in Britain and how they presented themselves within and outside of their respective organizations during the early years of the war. The secondary sources used for this paper consist of analyses of volunteerism during WWII and the dynamics that existed inside of these organizations, particularly the role that women played in volunteer organizations and how their roles differed from and intersected with men's roles. Secondly, I looked at sources that attempted to describe the British sensibility and "mood." I found these sources valuable to see a generalized version of the British personality and how their perceived group sentiment may have affected the ways in which they coped with the war and went about their volunteer duties. The primary sources come primarily from *The London Times* and cover all aspects of volunteer services and their roles in communities. Most interestingly, though, was the emphasis placed on uniforms and the "performance" aspect of the volunteer services which came to light through the newspaper articles which will be explored later. Finally, personal accounts of the Home Guard and speeches made by the president of the WVS round out the source material for this paper. They offer a glimpse inside the organization and what principles guided those who participated in the services.

⁴ Sheldon Garon. "Defending Civilians against Aerial Bombardment: A Comparative/Transnational History of Japanese, German, and British Home Fronts, 1918-1945." *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 14, no. 23 (December 2016): 1-19.

To begin, I will discuss the impressions and feelings associated with these volunteer organizations and how feelings of nationalism and “Britishness” were associated with the identities of the organizations. The leaderships and members of the voluntary services kept a close watch on the image projected by their organizations and how their “stiff upper lip” mentality affected the morale of the country. The critical involvement of women simultaneously added to the strong image of Britain during the war and bolstered the amount of people aiding the war effort at home by millions. Their role in home front volunteerism cannot be overlooked and this paper will look at their contributions more in-depth. Finally, the culmination of these institutions and the comportment of the volunteers can be seen during invasion scares and the Blitz that threatened British civilians during the early years of WWII.

The Service Organizations

A basic description of the volunteer organizations is necessary to understand their importance and degree to which they influenced the thoughts and actions of British civilians. The first organization that this paper focuses on is the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) which was created in early 1938 when the threat of bombings from the German Luftwaffe became a possibility. The Chairman of the London Air Raid Precautions (ARP), Herbert Morrison, said one of the most important tasks during any air raid would be extinguishing the fires quickly and effectively.⁵ The London Fire Department’s number of employed firefighters was too low for the expected amount of fires that could break out across the city, so London, as well as other cities, bolstered their numbers with 30,000 volunteers who helped tackle the smaller blazes and often

⁵ "Need for Fire Service Volunteers." *Times* (London, England) 22 June 1939: 9.

provided support for the professional firefighters.⁶ The incendiary bombs of the Blitz became such a force to be reckoned with that Morrison would eventually call upon more people to help defend factories, rails, ports, and places of cultural value in Britain.⁷ Unlike the other organizations mentioned, the AFS was open to both men and women, but their roles remained separate with men doing the more manual work of fighting fires and women driving vehicles or providing clerical assistance.⁸

Six months after the creation of the AFS, Lady Stella Reading created the Women's Voluntary Services (WVS) to help train and recruit women to join the ARP.⁹ Eventually the WVS became its own entity and absorbed the training exercises as inhouse operations that would eventually become their areas of expertise. The WVS became known for their excellent clerical and organizational work as well as nursing, distributing rations, and making house calls for those who needed extra assistance during the war.¹⁰ Lady Reading claimed that "her organization enabled housewives to overcome their 'innate modesty' ... and gain confidence in their capacity as citizens," and the application of the knowledge most women possessed at the time had applied perfectly to the needs left unfulfilled by other volunteer organizations at the time.¹¹ The WVS performed mostly support and clerical roles, but its close involvement with the community set it apart from other volunteer organizations.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "New Duties of Fire Watchers." *Times* (London, England) 1 Jan. 1941: 4.

⁸ "Auxiliary Fire Service." *Times* (London, England) 16 June 1938: 13.

⁹ Louise Westwood. "More Than Tea and Sympathy." *History Today* 48, no. 6 (June 1998): 3.

¹⁰ James Hinton. "Voluntarism and the Welfare/Warfare State. Women's Voluntary Services in the 1940s." *TWENTIETH CENTURY BRITISH HISTORY*, 1998. 279.

¹¹ Reading, Lady Stella and Virginia Thesiger. *It's the Job that Counts, 1939-1953. A Selection from the Speeches and Writings of the Dowager Marchioness of Reading* (1954), 2; James Hinton, *Voluntarism and the Welfare/Warfare State. Women's Voluntary Services in the 1940s*, 280.

Finally, the Home Guard came to fruition in 1940 after much worry and speculation about the possibility of German spies infiltrating Britain and the Fifth Column, so the Chiefs of Staff for the War Department declared that another system of defense and readiness should be created.¹² The Local Defence Volunteers (later renamed Home Guard) answered a radio announcement calling for men of all ages to volunteer their time to watching the skies for German paratroopers who may be looking to spy on the British.¹³ Soon after, the Home Guard was even allowed to carry weapons and fulfill more formal combat roles as volunteers.¹⁴ Many of the men who patrolled the cities at all hours of the day were WWI veterans and were described by the Prime Minister as having “the strongest desire to attack and come to close quarters with the enemy” as a way to deter any would-be paratroopers who may be picking up British radio frequencies.¹⁵ The idea of veterans armed tooth and nail to defend their cities created a powerful image that completed the desired look for Britain: calm, cool, and collected.

The British Sentiment During War

Threats of invasion and subjugation have been a part of the psyche of Britain since the Roman claim to the British Isles, Celtic rule, and through WWII as the Germans stood at the edge of the continent. Because of the seemingly constant barrage of people from the continent trying to exert their claims across the English Channel, the British people have a long and storied history of local militias banding together to try and overcome foreign invaders. The history of the volunteer organizations such as the Home Guard, WVS, and AFS share a common purpose of

¹² S. P. MacKenzie. *The Home Guard: A Military and Political History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 19-22.

¹³ "Prime Minister's Call to The Nation." *Times* (London, England) 15 July 1940: 5.

¹⁴ Mackenzie, *The Home Guard*, 54.

¹⁵ "Prime Minister's Call to The Nation"

protecting the people of Britain with their militia forbears and took it far beyond the level of inclusion seen in Britain before or since.¹⁶ For the men and women of these organizations during WWII, volunteering and helping the local or national community was a direct manifestation of their patriotism.¹⁷ John Brophy, a member of the Home Guard and author, believed that these organizations were “something new in history, something which no other nation, so far at any rate, has been able to emulate, yet [they] sprang from tradition.”¹⁸ While this may seem a bit hyperbolic, the call to action from Secretary of State for War Anthony Eden begging young men to join the Home Guard received an overwhelming response, as well as raising awareness for other volunteer organizations that would desperately need more volunteers in the months to come.¹⁹ In the end, a history of joining together in defense and defiance can only take a group of people so far, but for the British there is also a common state of mind that unites them beyond their shared history.

The prolific British author Anthony Glyn used the term “Cult of the Loser” to describe the British sentiment of idealizing and rooting for the underdog in any situation, regardless of their national origin (but usually British). Whether it be the smaller and weaker player in a Wimbledon match, Guy Fawkes, or Captain Lawrence Oates who ended his own life to ensure the survival of his crew, the British love a heroic loser.²⁰ Glyn said the ideal British hero is “the heroic loser, the man who, outnumbered and outgunned, still manages an epic last stand before

¹⁶ MacKenzie, *The Home Guard*, 5.

¹⁷ Lucy Noakes. “‘Serve to Save’: Gender, Citizenship and Civil Defence in Britain 1937-41” *Journal of Contemporary History*. 47 no.4 (2012): 735.

¹⁸ John Brophy and Eric Kennington. *Britain's Home Guard, A Character Study* (London, G.G. Harrap & Co. 1945) 6.

¹⁹ “Local Defence Volunteers.” *Times* [London, England] 15 May 1940: 3. *The Times Digital Archive*. Web. 25 Feb. 2018.

²⁰ Anthony Glyn. *The British; A Portrait of a People* (New York: Putnam, 1970) 28.

the end... [he] has to be brave and skillful, faithful unto death, but outnumbered and, in the end, doomed,” but if it must be a British war with British men fighting to keep evil at bay then victory could be tolerated.²¹ However, the victory must be an evenly matched, hard-fought one that reluctantly ekes out a win that ensures peace and independence. All of Britain found themselves in this position of wanting their military campaigns to succeed without getting their hopes too high. This sort of mentality is clearly visible in the way Winston Churchill was ousted from office immediately following the war. The British people preferred the Churchill who defiantly stood up against the Third Reich, not the war hero with his medals and glamor.²² To Glyn it seemed that the British, himself included, are “deeply suspicious of victory and the victorious.”²³ I believe this idea of constant suspicion of victory contributes to the British “stiff upper lip” mentality, and it is perfectly encapsulated in the *London Times* when they openly stated that “no excessive optimism was displayed in the general design” of the defenses meant to keep its readers safe from invasion.²⁴

Possibly the most important aspect of the British identity and how it contributed to the WWII effort must be this idea of a “stiff upper lip,” or keeping calm under adversity. This culture of enduring and getting through it in Britain has its roots in the 18th and 19th century and encompassed much of the British people as their identity became more homogenized, I believe, as the colonization of foreign lands necessitated a common attitude that could be impressed upon people in the colonies. British stoicism, another name for this particularly British idea, began to fade during 20th century, and the last generation to feel its effects were those who fought in WWI

²¹ Ibid., 26.

²² Glyn, *The British*, 36.

²³ Ibid., 31.

²⁴ “Local Defence Volunteers”

and made up a large portion of the home front volunteer force during WWII.²⁵ During the war, these former soldiers and their wives applied their emotional restraint to their volunteer work. They were encouraged to “reassert temperate masculinity” so that volunteer work could be done in a calm manner and set an example for the British people, especially those younger than them, on how to act to keep order even while the threat of the Germans loomed overhead.²⁶ In her speeches to the volunteers of the WVS, the president of the organization, Lady Reading, regularly asked for cooperation and professional attitudes from the women of the service because wartime was like a “painful but necessary surgery” because it is endured under the assumption that it will be better once it is over.²⁷ She made it completely clear that the women of the WVS were to be the example of the model citizen and normality, and that by their patience and courage they would keep Britain afloat by their strength of will and unwillingness to stop their work.²⁸ The “stiff upper lip” of the British ran so deeply in the minds of the British while operating within their volunteer roles that “not even the prospect of death itself would not deter a... member from carrying on” with their job.²⁹ From the beginning, the common British characteristics of calmness and dignity under pressure elevated the home front volunteer services and helped them become the backbone of British civil aid during the war, and their demeanor reflected what was needed from civilians so that domestic stability could be assured.

Image and Morale Control

²⁵ David Morely, and Kevin Robins, *British Cultural Studies: Geography, Nationality, and Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 45.

²⁶ Paul Ward. *Britishness Since 1870* (London: Routledge, 2004), 48-51.

²⁷ Lady Reading, *It's the Job that Counts*, 7-18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12, 13, 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

The idea of the “hidden curriculum” permeates throughout the field of education. It says that as an instructor gives the lesson, students pick up on the norms and expectations of the environment simply by watching the instructor and reflecting the expectations and behaviors seen in the classroom.³⁰ With or without their knowledge, the home front volunteers of WWII in Britain were exhibiting and expecting ordinary citizens to adhere to their hidden curriculum which included expanding recruitment for volunteer organizations, solidarity, and pride in the work being done no matter the level of involvement. These factors directly impacted the image and morale of not only those in volunteer organizations, but also the citizens of Britain, and others across the globe.

Issues of enlistment in the Home Guard were, in the beginning, a nonissue. The call for local volunteers that would eventually rally under the title of Home Guard went out on 14 May 1940 and the response was overwhelming to say the least.³¹ Within minutes of the radio announcement, thousands of men younger than 17 and older than 40 lined up for blocks outside of their local police stations, even in large cities such as London despite the intended audience for the call had been aimed primarily at rural men.³² In the next 24 hours, some 250,000 men signed up to watch, and if need be defend, the skies and their towns from German paratroopers and the Fifth Column.³³ By the end of two weeks that number nearly doubled, and the men of the Home Guard were so anxious about the possibility of being infiltrated that before being given firm orders or a chain of command they began performing patrols and setting up watch

³⁰ Mark Dziak. "Hidden Curriculum." *Salem Press Encyclopedia Online* (2016).

³¹ MacKenzie, *The Home Guard*, 34.

³² A Special Correspondent. "Thousands for Defence." *Times* (London, England) 16 May 1940: 3.

³³ "Rush to Join the L.D.V." *Times* (London, England) 17 May 1940: 6.

schedules.³⁴ Their commitment to their volunteerism shows the level of importance they placed upon themselves and their communities. It is important to note that there were complaints of some men not being allowed to join the Home Guard, most of them being aliens from France which may indicate a hesitation to include foreigners from enlisting for the fear of spies.³⁵ While the Home Guard became operational, the Women's Volunteer Services had already become a large organization with more than 165,000 active volunteers over a year before war was officially declared in September 1939.³⁶ Throughout 1940-41, WVS recruitment ballooned to over 1 million active members, and at its height the WVS had 1,200 stations across Britain training 10,000 women a week with over 2,000,000 million women who could be called up in the time of need.³⁷ These extraordinary numbers resulted from the reputation of the organizations in which they served and made it possible for the desired image of a Britain united in struggle, but never crippled. Women exceeded the number of volunteers the government expected and outpaced male volunteers for a time.³⁸ However, there were institutions such as the AFS where "rumors of inefficiency" kept their recruitment numbers habitually low and made the job of firefighting during the Blitz harder.³⁹ The British mentality of war spread as the number of volunteers grew, and with this growing membership came another aspect of image and morale that appealed to many of the home front volunteers: uniforms.

³⁴ MacKenzie, *The Home Guard*, 34

³⁵ E. Armelin. "Sir, -I wonder whether you are aware that." *Times* (London, England) 22 May 1940: 9.

³⁶ Lady Reading, *It's the Job that Counts*, 2

³⁷ Lady Reading, *It's the Job that Counts*, 16; "Women's Share in Civil Defence." *Times* (London, England) 31 Aug. 1939: 5.

³⁸ "National Service Recruiting." *Times* (London, England) 20 Mar. 1939: 11.

³⁹ "Need for Fire Service Volunteers."

With the dramatic rise in the number of volunteers across Britain, the need to be easily recognized as someone who could help in a time of need became of paramount importance.⁴⁰ Uniforms became a hot-button issue for volunteer organizations and often left leadership scrambling to find uniforms that suited their needs.⁴¹ The British government outfitted old and new factories for the sole purpose of making thousands of new military and civil service uniforms every day.⁴² With large scale production of uniforms for volunteers, various types of uniforms for each organization became the norm with the AFS leading the way with 3 separate uniforms for women and men depending on their positions and badges for rank. Differentiation among the volunteer groups led some to select their form of volunteerism based on the type of uniform available to them.⁴³ Lady Reading, of the WVS, said that “if women wear uniform, it is because it happens to be the most practical costume for the particular job they are doing,” so much thought was given as to who would wear the official WVS uniform.⁴⁴ James Hinton suggested that a uniform indicated an organized and disciplined service operating at a different level than pre-war volunteer services, thus elevating home front volunteers’ status and setting an example for those they served.⁴⁵ This idea is taken to the extreme in the case of the Home Guard where the standard issue armbands members wore transformed their idea of what their job was with the Home Guard. These men went so far as to begin pulling over cars and demanding identification from passersby, and generally disturbing ordinary people in the community.⁴⁶ Something as simple as an armband gave the Home Guard influence and power in the

⁴⁰ Hinton, *Voluntarism and the Welfare/Warfare State. Women's Voluntary Services in the 1940s*, 283.

⁴¹ MacKenzie, *The Home Guard*, 40; "House of Commons." *Times* (London, England) 24 July 1940: 2.

⁴² Our Special Correspondent. "Clothing the Army." *Times* (London, England) 14 Oct. 1939: 10.

⁴³ "Auxiliary Fire Service."

⁴⁴ Lady Reading, *It's the Job that Counts*, 5.

⁴⁵ Hinton, *Voluntarism and the Welfare/Warfare State. Women's Voluntary Services in the 1940s*, 33.

⁴⁶ MacKenzie, *The Home Guard*, 53.

community and the same can be said for every organization. Uniforms added another layer to the image of home front volunteerism and how it was expressed by volunteer organizations at the time.

Uniforms became such an integral part of the image of home front volunteers that the Queen inspected a uniform factory and commented on the numbers being made.⁴⁷ The more interesting point of this may be that the Queen even went to a uniform factory at all, and on several occasions home front volunteers participated in parades and inspections that increased their notoriety. Volunteer organizations regularly held public displays and training exercises for military or government officials to reinforce their value to their superiors and the communities they served. Hyde Park in London proved to be one of the major centers for these performances.⁴⁸ Hyde Park hosted many performances by the AFS, perennially struggling to find volunteers to become a part of the service, in which they displayed ladder and hose drills for the masses and the leadership of the London Fire Department. Up to eleven AFS stations would take part in a display of patriotism and showmanship that would hopefully elevate their reputation, and a boost in available volunteers would certainly help in future months when the full force of the Blitz would rain down in London and the other major cities of Britain.⁴⁹ Volunteer organizations also focused on displaying their men and women to members of British royalty such as the Duke of Kent and the King and Queen. The King and Queen were subject to displays by the AFS and WVS at home and across the Atlantic in Canada.⁵⁰ The Queen, much like visiting the uniform factory, was led on a personal tour of WVS headquarters by Lady Reading who remarked on the

⁴⁷ "Battle Dress in The Making." *Times* (London, England) 25 Oct. 1939: 5.

⁴⁸ "News in Brief." *Times* (London, England) 29 May 1939: 7.

⁴⁹ "London A.F.S. Inspected." *Times* (London, England) 29 Apr. 1940: 3.

⁵⁰ "The King and Queen." *Times* (London, England) 19 Oct. 1939: 11.

“calm and cheerful” nature of the volunteers she met with.⁵¹ As well as the domestic benefits of home front volunteer performances, Lady Reading realized the international attention being paid to their efforts and that their “resolution is being watched by other nations.”⁵² Public performances and displays of force by noncombat personnel may seem odd in a current context, but the exposure at home and abroad to their work and force of will absolutely impacted how the British handled the struggles of war.

For home front volunteers, the struggle of keeping their own composure for the sake of the people in their communities was as difficult as can be imagined, especially with a war raging. But with the help of massive numbers of like-minded people enlisting, their goal and message was clear: to defend and serve the people at home without thought as to the costs. To legitimize their actions and roles, they wore uniforms that told not only the people they helped, but themselves, that they had authority that must be responsibly exerted. The displays of strength performed by the volunteer organizations may seem antiquated, but they served the dual purpose of strengthening the resolve of the volunteers and the community by constantly reminding the people of Britain to stay strong and believe in the war efforts at home.

Women as National Volunteers

One of the most interesting groups to grapple with their shared identity and perception as home front volunteers were the women of Britain. Spearheaded by the Women’s Voluntary Services, as well as other groups of female volunteers, women had to make a role for themselves within the larger volunteer structure. The largest surge for volunteers, of any gender, occurred in

⁵¹ “Women Volunteers.” *Times* (London, England) 2 Sept. 1939: 13.

⁵² Lady Reading, *It’s the Job that Counts*, 17.

response to the call for Home Guard volunteers, and one month later an official in the War Office announced that women would not be allowed to join the Home Guard.⁵³ Allowing women into the Home Guard would “deprive” the WVS and factories that supported the war efforts of their labor.⁵⁴ At the time, sending women into potentially dangerous combat situations violated the female combat taboo that kept women at home during times of war.⁵⁵ In the previous World War, it was a woman’s role to preserve the “biological and cultural reproduction of the nation,” and in WWII it became evident that the need to fully utilize women on the domestic front would be crucial under the threat of German bombings.⁵⁶ Because women continued to represent the horrors of bombings as passive victims of foreign violence despite their more involved role during WWII, women were plagued by clerical and support roles as home front volunteers.⁵⁷ As a result, the WVS took the lead in joining women under a common cause and helped them shape their attitudes to be more focused and driven to help their fellow British citizens remain safe and calm. The all-female organization was met with some hostility from the ARP groups that headed the relief efforts for Blitzed towns and cities because the ARP thought the WVS was little more than a social club.⁵⁸ Despite the hesitance to include Lady Reading’s already established organization, the WVS went on to make their own way and become one of the largest and most impactful volunteer organizations of the war.

The WVS became a defining group of volunteers in Britain. James Hinton says that the WVS “saw itself as an organization of caring, no-nonsense, practical women anxious to get on

⁵³ Mackenzie, *The Home Guard*, 83.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 125-126.

⁵⁵ Gerard J. De Groot. "I Love the Scent of Cordite in Your Hair": Gender Dynamics in Mixed Anti-Aircraft Batteries during the Second World War," *History* no. 265 (1997): 74.

⁵⁶ Noakes, *Serve to Save*, 736.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 741.

⁵⁸ Noakes, *Serve to Save*, 747.

with the job in hand without wasting time.⁵⁹ The idea of keeping one's head down and getting the job done without complaint is quintessentially British, but for the President of the WVS, Lady Stella Reading, "the central purpose for the WVS... was to cultivate and mobilize [the] reserves of feminine 'character.'" This feminine character was formed by the "deep consciousness of the woman," and seems to have been a previously untapped source of willpower before WWII that embodied the "stiff upper lip."⁶⁰ Remember, it was the overwhelming number of women signing up for ARP work that prompted the creation of the WVS, so their collective power cannot be denied. Their reputation for solving the most difficult problems facing the volunteer efforts during the war defined their reputation and set them apart from the Home Guard and AFS where very specific goals for their operations limited their scope of involvement and could even alienate them from the community.⁶¹ The WVS also did not receive the more prestigious jobs like fighting fires or being on patrols for paratroopers like their male counterparts. Lady Reading urged her members to "remember that though ninety-nine percent of [their] work may be boring," one percent was fun, and all of it was worthwhile.⁶² New jobs would arise for women of the WVS, and they worked not for congratulations from their friends and neighbors, but for the greater good.⁶³ In a public appearance, Lady Reading reaffirmed the WVS's commitment relieving the suffering of the British people and their preparedness for any task they be asked to undertake. She concludes with, "To all who knew the women of Great Britain it was no surprise that even the ghastly spectre of such a catastrophe as

⁵⁹ James Hinton, *Voluntarism and the Welfare/Warfare State. Women's Voluntary Services in the 1940s*, 283.

⁶⁰ James Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership, and the Second World War: continuities of class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19.

⁶¹ Westwood, *More than Tea and Sympathy*, 3; MacKenzie, *The Home Guard*, 87.

⁶² Lady Reading, *It's the Job that Counts*, 12.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 17.

war facing them had not made them throw up their hands in despair.⁶⁴ A powerful reassertion of their mindset and attitude during the war that was shared by the British people and a strong reminder that British women were just as tough and resilient as the men.

With the rise in prominence of the WVS among the home front volunteer organizations, certain tensions were sure to arise between themselves, the male leadership, and members of other organizations.⁶⁵ In direct contradiction to image of a people united against the plagues of war, the traditional roles of gender and war came between members and leadership by attempting to separate women from war as much as possible. In the past, the idea of needing to save women and protect them from the ravages of war effectively isolated women from any meaningful role in wartime efforts, and as a direct result their capabilities were not used effectively. As WWII came into view, competing ideas of female inclusion in domestic war efforts risked a divided war effort. Including women in historically male roles meant that a “feminized” force would be defending the domestic front with plenty of volunteers to help, but they emasculated the patriarchal organizations they joined. The other option was to separate women from their potential as home front volunteers, as in the past, while never having enough volunteers to serve local communities.

Women already threatened the masculinity of male volunteers, and an excellent example of the height of this male/female tension is in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), the first active duty branch of civil defence open to women.⁶⁶ The ATS was not a volunteer service, but it does highlight some of the struggles that female volunteers experienced across volunteer

⁶⁴ "Women's Share in Civil Defence."

⁶⁵ James Hinton, *Voluntarism and the Welfare/Warfare State. Women's Voluntary Services in the 1940s*, 281.

⁶⁶ Noakes, *Serve to Save*, 737.

organizations. The ATS was a civil defense organization that, like the Home Guard, watched the skies for German planes coming across the channel to attack or bomb. Their job was to fire anti-aircraft rounds at the planes in attempt to damage or divert the planes from their targets. The leadership of the ATS consisted of old military vets who had trouble seeing the value of women and constantly belittled and relegated them to support tasks such as spotting, desk jobs, and loading the guns.⁶⁷ Women could not fire the anti-aircraft weapons despite holding the same position and rank as the men.⁶⁸ More damaging though, rumors of the female members having loose moral qualities and engaging in adulterous behavior plagued the women of the ATS because the members all lived on base together and accusations were, of course, without warrant.⁶⁹ Because these middle-class women joined the ATS and spent their time in the constant company of men, the male perception of women skewed more towards the domestic and social norms of the time.⁷⁰ The men were treated as soldiers and acted like big brothers rather than brothers in arms to the women with whom they served. This perception of women as either inept, adulterers, or little sisters perpetuated the long-standing gender dynamics and reinforced the idea that women could not be as useful as men.⁷¹ The WVS tried to reign in this image of women and project their own powerful and effective image to people of Britain. Lady Reading sought to instill her members with the “stiff upper lip” that the British had cultivated and used it to remind the people of Britain who they were and how to behave despite the levels of criticism they received.

⁶⁷ De Groot, *I Love the Scent of Cordite in Your Hair*, 76

⁶⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 82.

⁷¹ De Groot, *I Love the Scent of Cordite in Your Hair*, 84-89.

Perhaps intentionally, or not, the women who volunteered with the WVS and other organizations pushed the boundaries of gender norms at the time. They entered a field where men had traditionally held power and made it their own. Lady Reading, the female president of one of the largest volunteer organizations, made sure to instill in her volunteers that service and duty come before anything else. Being a proper British citizen and an example to communities across Britain would be their most important job with the WVS aside from the actual volunteer work. With more than 2 million women in the WVS alone, it is impossible to say if the domestic war efforts could have been managed without the women who went against the odds and societally appropriate behavior to volunteer for their country.

Beyond the Bombings: The Blitz

Possibly the most trying time for the British people in their history occurred between 1939-1941 in large cities and areas of industrial production. These cities and towns experienced some of the most devastating attacks from the German air raids and bombing efforts. The attention paid to large cities such as London, Birmingham, and Liverpool by the Luftwaffe stretched the limits of the average British citizen's morale, and the home front volunteers helped return life to normal and maintain order.

The predominant fear of British citizens during the first years of the war was the threat of German paratroopers invading silently in the night and infiltrating their homes and towns.⁷² Though the threat of German soldiers never materialized into much more than that, a threat, the Germans did conduct an effective bombing campaign that did affect the British at home.⁷³ The

⁷² MacKenzie, *The Home Guard*, 21-22.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 22.

Luftwaffe wanted to inflict as much damage as possible and assumed the devastation they caused would deflate British citizens into a state of mental defeat that would lead to military defeat. Unfortunately for the Germans, however, beyond destroying buildings and causing periodic distress, the Blitz did little in terms of crushing British people's resolve.⁷⁴ The bombings were supposed to destroy mass morale in Britain and cripple the production of the British war efforts both in terms of manufacturing power and the willpower of those working towards British victory. While the Blitz did cause significant damage and killed thousands of civilians, the destruction was not enough to "disrupt the basic decency, loyalty, morality, and optimism of the vast majority" or "diminish the human will, or at least the capacity to endure" of the men and women of Britain.⁷⁵ Their "stiff upper lip" prevailed. In this sense, it seems as if the cost in manpower and resources for the Germans outweighed the expected benefits of the bombings because of the resilience of everyday people.⁷⁶ The British people kept their composure and sense of urgency in this time of need, and the millions of home front volunteers across Britain helped pick up the broken pieces of their lives and towns.

Tom Harrison, in his book *Living Through the Blitz*, wrote that morale among British citizens was hard to pin down during the air raids. The simple fear of being bombed may have been more frightening in the minds of civilians than the actual bomb sirens going off. When confronted with the reality of a bomb, the British could rationalize and conquer the challenge, whereas anxiety and more long-term worries weighed heavily on their minds. The people who feared the bombings in the beginning eventually came to treat it as a part of life thanks in partly

⁷⁴ Tom Harrison. *Living Through the Blitz*. New York: Schocken Books, 1989. 280.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 280.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 280.

to the quick and calculated responses executed by volunteer organizations.⁷⁷ Harrison goes on to say that the greatest factor in the victory at home, in terms of morale, was the ability of civilians to regroup with little complaint when the worst was at their doorstep at the cost of extreme discomfort in their personal lives.⁷⁸ From the outside looking in, the Blitz may seem like a nearly insurmountable event that would burden any person beyond belief, but struggle and pain is relative. British civilians seemed to have been relatively undisturbed by the bombings with most people who participated in a survey citing issues like rationing, health, and personal relationships as more stressful than the air raids.⁷⁹ People simply straightened their jaws, took a breath, and continued working for their families and thinking beyond the bombings. As a result, the men, women, and children of Britain made it through the bombings intact, and work only ever ceased for a few hours wherever a bomb dropped.⁸⁰

The work done by the AFS, WVS, and Home Guard during the Blitz cannot be overstated in terms of the mental supports they provided the communities they served. They were an invaluable source of strength for the people of Britain during the Blitz, and the scope of the jobs required of the home front volunteers grew steadily throughout the bombings. Because of the destruction caused by German planes, every volunteer performed their primary duties as well as search and rescue, clearing debris, rebuilding, treating the injured, and more that should have raised the prestige home front volunteerism, but problems still existed for volunteer organizations despite their assistance to the British community. For example, the AFS played a crucial role in the survival of many structures and homes in the towns attacked with incendiary

⁷⁷ Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz*, 282.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 282-286.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 287.

bombs, but recruitment for the organization always lagged behind other organizations.⁸¹ As stated before, this may be attributed to rumors of mismanagement, but the more practical problems of not having proper trainings grounds and a lack of appropriate equipment for the firefighters truly bogged down the efforts of the AFS.⁸² The WVS experienced a different issue in terms of their effectiveness during the Blitz. While the AFS was expected to competently do their job but could not get the resources required to perform, the WVS was saddled with the expectation that they would provide only surface-level assistance (“tea and sympathy”) and the organization was much more of a social club than a place for serious volunteers. In years past, the idea that volunteer groups led by wealthy, usually liberal, women performed superficial services to a limited number of causes led many to believe that women could not effectively help in times of need.⁸³ These sexist overtones ran rampant, and this stigma from the late Victorian Era damaged the reputation of the WVS before they had the chance to prove themselves. Not only did the WVS blow away other organizations in terms of their range of services provided, but they had some of the highest recruitment numbers of any organization during the war.⁸⁴ They used these great numbers to provide invaluable aid to the citizens impacted by the ravages of war.⁸⁵

Perhaps the most problematic of the volunteer organizations was the Home Guard. Within ten days of the Home Guard’s creation, members of parliament began arguing over the merits of the volunteer organization. One prominent critic of the entire movement, Leslie

⁸¹ “Need for Fire Service Volunteers”

⁸² “Progress in Defence.” *Times* (London, England) 3 June 1939: 13.

⁸³ Noakes, “Serve to Save,” 747.

⁸⁴ “Women’s Share in Civil Defence”

⁸⁵ Lady Reading, *It’s the Job That Counts*, 17.

Hore-Belisha, thought that if German paratroopers were to appear on native ground that the best and brightest soldiers should be there to face them, not local volunteers who may be too old or lack sufficient training.⁸⁶ Another member of parliament tried to assuage his worries by saying that the Home Guard was “an additional and invaluable insurance against sporadic landing from the air, but they are supplementary to a system of defence which is already strong, carefully disposed and efficient.”⁸⁷ This was a vague answer to a specific question that ended up never needing to be addressed. The more pressing issue for the Home Guard had to do with their excessive and overzealous use of force. The men of the Home Guard began taking their jobs so seriously that they would pull people over in their cars to check their citizenship status trying to find German spies. Tensions were so high that normal British citizens would be arrested, interrogated, and if they resisted, possibly shot. One of the most high-profile instances of excessive force by the Home Guard occurred when a Royal Air Force pilot was shot because he refused to show his ID to the local volunteers, which he did not have to according to any law.⁸⁸ These problems were ignored or explained away by the higher ups within the military because Home Guard volunteers were acting with the “highest motives” and should be praised more for their diligence of duty rather than negligence of action.⁸⁹ Aside from the issues that home front volunteers experienced or caused, their contributions to home front efforts cannot be overlooked in terms of their value during the Blitz with maintaining the safety of British citizens and keeping morale high.

Conclusion

⁸⁶ "House of Commons." *Times* (London, England) 23 May 1940: 3.

⁸⁷ Our Parliamentary Correspondent. "Home Defence." *Times* (London, England) 24 May 1940: 6.

⁸⁸ MacKenzie, *The Home Guard*, 59.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

The national volunteers who participated in volunteer work across Britain during WWII were an incredible force that held together British citizens through the darkest of times. The work of the Women's Volunteer Services, Auxiliary Fire Service, and Home Guard, and others served communities across Britain through the pre-war paratrooper scare, the Blitz, and through VE Day. Their work went above and beyond what had been asked of British civilians before them. They worked day and night to protect and serve the people around them for little to no reward beyond a sense of accomplishment and service. Aside from the physical acts of service they performed, the national volunteers stressed image and morale control among civilians. The volunteers embodied the ideal of the "stiff upper lip" mentality for those around them, and their example helped keep the people of Britain calm and effective in their relief efforts throughout the war. This can be seen especially during the Blitz when anyone's nerves could become frayed, but with the help of the national volunteers Britain overcame the Blitz and the many hardships that followed. British Stoicism and the hard work of the men and women of the national volunteer organizations played a crucial role in the survival of the British war efforts at home.

Despite the great work performed by volunteers, conflict arose out of what should have been a unifying moment in British history.⁹⁰ As the war ended and the millions of volunteers and civilians who had worked together for years settled into life during peace, the process of rebuilding the homes and businesses of Britain divided the nation along class lines and undid the ties that had linked people during the war.⁹¹ Money and politics got in the way of all the work

⁹⁰ Brophy, *Britain's Home Guard*, 5.

⁹¹ Ward, *Britishness*, 123.

accomplished during the war, and the legacy of widespread volunteerism ended shortly thereafter.